ALMOST LIKE CHRISTMAS

JOSEPH HELLER

A MULHOLLAND STRAND MAGAZINE SHORT

Almost Like Christmas

Joseph Heller

MULHOLLAND BOOKS
LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY
NEW YORK BOSTON LONDON

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Mulholland Books / Little, Brown and Company
Hachette Book Group
1290 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10104
mulhollandbooks.com
twitter.com/mulhollandbooks
facebook.com/mulhollandbooks

First ebook edition: December 2016
Originally published in *The Strand Magazine,* 2013

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ISBN 978-0-316-36115-6

E3-20161031-JV-PC

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The coffee was gone again. Mercer swore softly, tiredly, and carried the coffee pot to the basin. He moved slowly. His eyes were red and he ground them mercilessly with the heels of both hands while the percolator was filling. He needed a shave now, and the total relaxation of his heavy face gave him the hopeless, stupid, waxen look of a drunkard. Carter sat limply at the large pine table and watched him, scarcely seeing him in his own fatigue. It had been a long night, he was thinking, a fantastically wicked, confused, and diabolical night, and it was only just beginning.

He watched Mercer start back across the room and stop at the window to stare out glumly at the entrance to the hospital across the street. The chill fog outside had streaked the glass with drippings of mist that gleamed like cheap jewelry in the light from the naked yellow bulb in the room. The window was dirty, and each time that Carter's eyes fell on the coarse patterns of grime he was reminded of photographs of diseased tissue that he had seen a long time before in *Life* magazine. They had been drinking coffee for hours, and the warm odor was thick and stale in the air and made him nauseous.

"Is anybody out there?"

"A few men," Mercer replied, after a full minute had gone by. "Men from the railroad, probably."

He turned from the window and set the coffee pot on the electric burner. For several seconds there was a quiet fury of hissing and sputtering as the water on the outside of the can boiled off.

Only Henney was in the room with them now. Beeman and Whitcombe had gone to the hospital to wait for news of the Wilson boy. There were no prisoners in the jail downstairs, and there was

little for Henney to do. There never was any real need for a night porter, but Henney was Mercer's cousin, a consumptive, simple-minded man with very weak eyes who could not hold down a job anyplace else, and Mercer maintained the sinecure for him. Henney was reading the newspaper. He had been reading the same eight pages all night. Suddenly he began humming aloud, unconscious of the annoyance he was creating.

Mercer stood it as long as he could, and then said:

"Henney, go down to the diner and get some chicken sandwiches. Don't let him put any butter on."

Henney came to his feet with a start and hurriedly folded the newspaper. "Sure, Jay, sure."

"Cigarettes," Carter said moodily.

Mercer gave his approval, and Henney walked out. The coffee was bubbling already, sending rapid puffs into the air. Mercer brought the pot to the table. Carter shook his head, but he filled both cups anyway and poured condensed milk into them from a can. There was no sugar. Carter stirred the brew and took a quick gulp. The coffee scalded his throat but left his body cold. Mercer sat down facing him.

"Why don't you go home, Carter?" he said slowly. "Get some sleep. Get up early and go away for a few days. Stay out of town awhile. They may get after you also."

Carter shook his head, although he knew Mercer was right. His eyes were stinging with rawness, and there was a stabbing ache in his temples, his jaws, and in the back of his neck. He had caught cold during the chilly vigil. His eyes were tearing, and he wiped them with his hand every few minutes. He needed sleep badly. He rested his head in his upright hands, massaging his face torpidly against his fingers. The contact brought a fleeting relief, but soon the points of his elbows were sore against the rough, unvarnished wood.

He had a busy schedule the next day. He had classes all through the morning and into the afternoon, the first one at eight, and after that the football team to coach until dusk. His puzzlement increased at the thought of the football team. If anyplace, it was there, with all the physical contact that the game required, that he would have expected an outbreak, but that had gone smoothly, better than even he had dared to hope, and then, just as he was beginning to relax, to triumph, abruptly, fiercely, irrevocably, everything that had been

accomplished, everything for which he had toiled so long, with a suddenness that left him dazed, was rudely, cruelly, decisively, and insensately obliterated by the primordial brutality of an alley fracas.

His consciousness was throbbing now with the dim recognition of atavistic pressures that were emerging uncontrollably all about him. He could see but not understand them, and they were horrifying in their mute and immutable finality. All afternoon he had been watching the terrible recrudescence of savage animal passions, and he was tormented by the helpless despair of being unable to arrest it, of being unable, even, to try. His confusion rose suddenly, filling him with panic, and he dug his nails painfully into his forehead and shivered.

The sound of footsteps roused him to attention. His eyes went hopefully to the door, but it was only Henney returning with the sandwiches. He stepped into the room spryly, swinging the door closed behind him, and delivered a brown paper bag to Mercer. There was no stop on the door, and it slammed shut with a sharp, reverberating boom that rattled hollowly through the walls of the building and seemed to shake the foundations. Carter winced and Mercer frowned, and Henney, himself surprised by the report, shifted uneasily and smiled at Mercer with apology.

Mercer pushed a package of cigarettes to Carter and began tearing the bag along the seam, doing it slowly with very deliberate caution. His thoughts were obviously elsewhere, but the intense preoccupation they gave his manner solemnized the act, and for a moment he seemed like a surgeon making a careful incision. There were four sandwiches inside, each wrapped sturdily in thick wax paper. Gazing at them, Mercer spoke to Henney. He said:

"Did you see Beeman?"

Henney shook his head. "No, Jay. They said he was still in the hospital."

"Who said?"

"The men outside."

Mercer sighed with exhaustion and looked up at him.

"Henney, what's going on outside?"

"Nothin', Jay," Henney said quickly. "Just a few men waitin' around to see what happens."

Mercer regarded him steadily for a moment and then stared down at the table. He had large hands, Carter noticed, with strong, calloused, fleshy fingers. There were spots of dirt on each of the big

knuckles and in the folds of skin between them.

"I spoke to Whitcombe," Henney said suddenly. He glanced significantly at Carter, and then went on in an excited voice that kept rising gleefully with a shrill, whinnying, malicious hysteria. "He says we're goin' up tomorrow an' burn 'em all out. He says we're gonna get rid of 'em for good. He says it doesn' matter what happens to the Wilson boy. He says we're goin' up anyway an—"

He might have continued indefinitely had not Mercer interrupted.

"Did you let him put butter on these sandwiches?" he demanded.

The sudden inquiry caught Henney by surprise, and he blinked his eyes in confusion.

"What's 'at, Jay?" he stammered.

"Nothing, Henney," Mercer said, in a softer voice. "It's not important."

He pushed a sandwich to Carter. Carter pushed it back.

"You'd better eat something," said Mercer, with rough solicitude. "You look like hell."

"So do you," Carter replied sullenly.

He took the sandwich and bit into it. The gums on one side of his mouth were inflamed, and he moved the food over with his tongue and chewed it slowly. He drank some coffee and then took another bite and washed that down with more coffee and then, even while he was reminding himself that he had eaten nothing since lunch and was telling himself that the chicken tasted good, he laid the rest of the sandwich aside and forgot it.

"I tol' 'im no butter," Henney said defensively, finally understanding. "I didn' watch 'im, but I tol' 'im not to put any butter on."

Mercer was silent, and Henney picked up his newspaper and resumed reading.

Soon Beeman and Whitcombe returned. Whitcombe was a brash young man of twenty-six who wore his uniform with a careless insolence. Beeman was older, almost forty, and hard as nails. He had a pale, gaunt, angular face, with very thin lips, strong bones, and a small, round, wrinkled scar high up on one cheek, and he was the coldest and most efficient looking man that Carter had ever seen. He wore black leather gloves, thin, black, tight leather gloves that gave him a menacing air of competence.

“He’s going to die,” Beeman said, when he had crossed the room and was standing by the window.

“Did he say anything?” asked Carter.

“He’s in a coma.”

“Did he say anything before that?”

“He don’t have to,” Whitcombe drawled placidly from the side. “There are witnesses.”

“But did he say anything?” Carter implored vehemently.

“He said that Jess Calgary did it,” Mercer said, without looking up.

“Is that all?”

“That’s all.”

Carter cursed silently. Beeman had poured out a cup of coffee, and he came to the table for the can of condensed milk and the wet spoon that lay at Carter’s elbow.

“They know you up there, Carter,” he said, in his dry, precise voice. “You could bring him in for us.”

“I’m a schoolteacher,” Carter said. “Not a policeman.”

“Not for long,” said Whitcombe. “I guess this puts you out of business.”

Carter saw the wink he sent in Henney’s direction and the unsuccessful effort Henney made to repress a chuckle. He was too weary to resent it.

“We’ll pick him up in the morning,” Mercer decided. “It’s too late to do anything now.”

“He may be hard to find,” Carter argued.

“There’ll be enough people helping us,” Beeman replied.

“There sure will,” echoed Whitcombe.

Henney, encouraged perhaps by Whitcombe’s manner, took a bold step toward Carter.

“Yes,” he exclaimed broadly, his pale eyes glinting with a vindictive light. “You’re God damn right there will. You ‘an your smart college ideas. Puttin’ ‘em all in the same school like that. We all knew this would happen, but you wouldn’ listen. No, you were too smart. Well, it’s all your fault, God damn it, an’ it serves you right!”

Carter sat without looking at him, listening to his voice as if to some incomprehensible noise in the distance. When he finished, Mercer let out a long breath and spoke to Whitcombe.

“Find something for him to do downstairs.”

Henney followed Whitcombe out docilely, glancing back at Carter with dogged emphasis. He was very careful with the door this time, too careful, and after he had gone it swung open with a creaking moan and wavered there slightly in the draft from the hall. Carter stared at it morosely. It distracted him terribly, like a crooked picture hanging on the wall, and he rose finally, swearing, and slammed it shut. Every bone in his back gripped him with pain, and when he sat down he could do nothing but curl forward over the table like some monstrous fetus.

"Go get him, Carter," Mercer said. "It'll be better that way."

"Will you take care of him if I do?"

"We'll do what we can."

"How much will that be?"

Mercer was honest. "You know how it is, Carter," he said regretfully. "We're all relatives here."

Carter laughed scornfully and shook his head.

"Be smart, Carter," said Beeman. "They're your friends, not ours. If we go, every car in town will go with us."

Carter gave no reply. The coffee was making him sick. He carried the cup to the basin and turned the faucet on to rinse it. The force of the water almost tore it from his hand. When he drank finally, the water was tepid and colored slightly with the faint shadow of rust and still tasted strongly of coffee.

"I'll think about it," he snapped irritably.

"Think fast, Carter," Beeman pursued remorselessly. "He has to be here by morning."

The inflexible logic of his reply and the cold and hostile persistency with which it had been delivered were more than Carter could stand.

"Let me alone!" he cried furiously.

He slammed the cup down with a bang, shattering it into a noisy spray of fragments, and stared angrily from the slumping reluctance of Mercer to Beeman's trim and rugged and clean-shaven rigidity, his eyes darting defiantly from one to the other and back again, and then to the faded, yellow squalor of the old walls with their loathsome clots of squashed mosquitoes and to the mute, black wound of the window where the sparkling moisture and crusted patterns of soot distorted the amputated reflections on the glass, and finally he turned abruptly and strode from the room and down the stairs to the landing where Whitcombe and Henney stood in

quiet conversation and past them swiftly without a glance and down the last flight of steps, stumbling over the bottom few, and through the door and out, finally, into the street.

The cold, fresh air brought him to a stop. He stood there, panting, and allowed himself to grow calm. It was still dark out, although the first sinister rays of green were already creeping into the sky. A number of men shifted slowly in a group across the street. In their shaded movements, they seemed like the amorphous images of a dream. The streetlamps had long since been extinguished, but the paved road was dimly visible in both directions, looking like shrouded marble in the paling darkness. It was a few minutes before Carter realized he was cold. He pulled his coat closer about him and walked down the street to the diner.

Three men were at the counter, a young mechanic from the filling station and two older men from the railroad.

"They've been sitting around all night," the mechanic was complaining insistently, when Carter entered, "just like they expected him to walk in alone and lock himself in a cell."

They fell silent at Carter's appearance. Carter paused in the doorway, caught in the harsh spotlight of their belligerent curiosity. He swayed uncertainly a moment and then walked to the other end of the counter.

"Hear anything about the Wilson boy, Mr. Carter?" the mechanic called after him.

Carter shook his head and sat down directly in front of the cake stand. A solitary cut of coconut pie was before him. It was soggy and yellow, and grew after a minute to resemble some festering organ of the body. He shifted to another seat.

Freddie Hawkins approached slowly, flicking idly at crumbs with a clean white towel.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Carter," he said quietly.

"Thanks, Freddie. I'm glad someone is." Carter kept his own voice low. "Bring me some coffee, please."

"Strange thing, Mr. Carter," Freddie said, with an abstracted air of puzzlement, as he set the cup down, "that Calgary boy getting into trouble. He did some work for me when I enlarged the place. Funny fellow. Anyway, Mr. Carter, here's what stumps me. He's a big fellow, and that Wilson boy ain't no wider than a splinter. Why'd he have to stab him?"

"I don't know, Freddie. I don't know anything anymore.

Freddie, you've been listening to them. What's going to happen tomorrow?"

Freddie shook his head. "There's going to be trouble, Mr. Carter. It's like a holiday, a real holiday, and they're going to have it, no matter who pays for it. It's almost like Christmas the way everybody's walking around in a fever of excitement. Don't let their anger fool you. It's a chance to feel important, and they're going to use it."

"Why, Freddie? Why?"

"That's hard to say, Mr. Carter. Maybe they just want to be respectable. Everybody wants to be respectable, and joining a mob is the easiest way."

Carter nodded, and after a few seconds, said:

"Freddie, what are you going to do tomorrow?"

"Me, Mr. Carter?" Freddie said. "I get pretty tired by the time I finish up here. I guess I'll just go home and sleep. There's not much else I can do, is there?"

The door opened before Carter could reply, and Mercer entered, moving sluggishly with a ponderous fatigue. He stood motionless a moment, his eyes going through the oblong interior until they found Carter. The tough stubble on his face was black now and very dense.

"Hey, Mercer!" one of the men from the railroad demanded. "When the hell are you getting busy?"

Mercer ignored him. He walked slowly to Carter and sat down beside him.

"You need a shave," Carter said.

"Go get him, Carter. It's the only thing that will keep the people in town."

"Do you think it will?"

"It might," Mercer said. "We'll hold him as long as we can. Maybe they'll be too tired for anything else."

"Turn him right over," Freddie suggested. "Don't give them a chance to win anything. Maybe you can put some shame into them that way."

"Who let you in?" Mercer said to him.

"I did," answered Carter.

"Bring me some coffee, Freddie."

"Some cold water," Carter added. "A glass of cold water."

Freddie moved off with a nod. Mercer watched Carter steadily,

waiting for his reply. Carter shifted uncomfortably.

"Get me some gum," he said. "My throat is sore."

Mercer called to Freddie for chewing gum. Carter had forgotten the cigarettes. When Freddie returned, Mercer sent him for a pack. Carter began quickly on a slice of gum, but his back teeth started aching almost immediately, and when he turned irately to spit the gum out it stuck to his lip, and after he had plucked it off with his hand it adhered to his fingers and wouldn't shake off, and he was forced finally, cursing aloud by this time, to twist it off with a paper napkin.

"I'll go talk to him," Carter said. "I'll go hear what he has to say."

Mercer nodded and said nothing.

"That's all," Carter insisted. "That's all I'm going to do."

Mercer nodded again. Carter rose and walked outside. Dawn was coming with a rush, bold, brazen, and bright, and the blackness that had consolingly made the hours seem unreal was mixing already with a dull, gray, morning light that stirred like heavy dust in the air and gave the forbidding pallor of tombstones to the concrete sidewalks and the two imitation marble Corinthian columns in front of the bank and to the flat, white facades of all the buildings that stood small and square on both sides of the quiet street. Mercer was beside him.

"It's too early," Carter said.

"They'll be getting up early."

"All right. I'll go now."

"Thanks, Carter."

"Don't thank me!" Carter said, with vicious feeling. "For Christ's sake, don't thank me!"

He turned from him and strode back past the police station to where he had parked his car in the afternoon. He had forgotten to put the top down, and the steering wheel and the two brown leather seats in front were coated with moisture. He had left the cigarettes behind again. The windshield was a solid blank of mist. He entered the car and drove slowly toward the river, gravely intrigued by the ground fog bunched up into thick, white veils. It was going to be a nice day. The sun was full already, and the few clouds in the sky were puffed up like clean bedding and scattered remotely through the heavens. An empty shell of a moon hung in profile overhead. A raw chill was in the air.

He crossed the bridge and went faster as he moved into the hills where the small community of Negro farmers, whose begetters of a generation before had emigrated from the Deep South to purchase the land from the town on a plan dictated by the authorities, contended with the tough, earthen slopes for substance.

Soon he passed Will Perkins alone in his field, a mule in traces and a bulky hand plow before him in silhouette, standing motionless as a monument as he watched Carter speed by. There was something odd about the scene, and when he had passed some more of their farms, each with a solitary sentinel staring somberly toward the road, he realized what it was. There was no smoke in the chimneys, no sign of a woman or child; the only motion came from the restless thrusts of a hound or the scratching flurry of chickens or from a fat sow swaying through the yard with a squealing litter at her heels. The families had been moved out overnight; the men had remained behind and were waiting. There was pathos in the landscape, in the utter lack of activity, in the grim, gray, ominous quiet, and Carter was reminded for a moment of Sudbury and Hales taking the sacrament in the tower with the knowledge that at that same moment their lives were being traded to the mob. The need for haste swept over him, and he drove faster still.

He had been to the Calgary place before, but he was not sure now that he remembered the way, and when he arrived at the dusty thoroughfare that marked the settlement, he left his car and hurried into the general store. About a dozen men stood inside. Carter scanned each of the men quickly.

"Where's Ira Calgary?"

There was no sound. He scowled impatiently and picked out a man whose name he remembered.

"Raymond, where's Ira Calgary?"

"Ah don' know, Mista' Cahta'," Raymond answered. "Ah 'spect he's at his place."

"Take me there."

Raymond moved forward soberly, a square, good-looking man with a face made for sport and virile merriment. A voice from the back intoned:

"How's the Wilson boy, Mr. Carter?"

Carter came to an abrupt stop. There was a long moment of silence before he could reply.

“He’s all right,” he answered slowly, turning a bit to face them. “Yes, he’s all right.” He paused uncertainly in the doorway and then turned sharply and walked out.

They passed two homes to get to the Calgary place, each with a man in dark clothes gazing at them with lugubrious interest. Ira Calgary was waiting at the gate to his yard, a corroded feeding pail in his hands and a few brown hens clucking at his feet.

“You’d better give them something to eat,” Carter said, trying to smile.

Calgary turned with obedient melancholy and chucked a handful of corn to the ground. He looked back at Carter and waited. He was a tall, thin man with a long face, heavy lips, and big teeth. His eyes were mottled with moist flecks of yellow and protruded slightly. There was a goitrous swelling on his neck.

“Too bad about that scrape yesterday.” Carter paused, but Calgary remained silent, and he swallowed nervously and went on. “Good thing no one was hurt. The Wilson boy is all right. They want Jess in town to sign a paper. I’ll drive him in and then take him on to school when he’s finished.”

Calgary regarded him suspiciously. “You say no one was hurt?”

“No. It was only a scratch. Where’s Jess?”

Calgary looked dubiously at Raymond.

“Go get him, Ira,” Raymond said.

“He says no one was hurt,” Calgary argued.

“Go get him, Ira,” Raymond repeated firmly.

Calgary turned and walked despondently into the house. Carter and Raymond waited without talking. Far below them the town rested like a somnolent, white island, its anchored insularity intensified by the brief contact it made with the state highway that tapped it obliquely and then darted swiftly into infinity like a jagged cable. The dirt road he had traveled was clear and sharp. A heavy haze enriched the color, and it unrolled slantingly into town with the softness of a ceremonial carpet, the dark hues alternating in radiant planes of purple and deep red in the shifting daylight. A rooster sent an echoing question into space.

The door to the house opened and Ira Calgary reappeared. Jess was with him, walking in passive silence, tall and thin like his father, but not nearly as tall and a good deal wider. A bandage bound his head from front to back. One side of his face was badly smashed; the broken flesh was swollen and discolored. Carter

turned cold when he saw him.

"You're hurt, Jess," he said softly.

"Yes, suh, Mr. Carter."

Carter gazed at him with morbid awe. He forced down a rising taste of nausea, burdened to his soul suddenly by that viscous paralysis that came to him always with the spectacle of illness, violence, or injury, and he balanced himself against a feeling of dizziness that awoke every nerve in his body to the pains and cruel pressures of all his tired and infected parts. He swallowed again and said: "They want to ask you some questions, Jess. I thought I'd drive you in and then take you to school when you're finished."

"He says no one was hurt."

"Yes," Carter said. "Will you come?"

Jess nodded. His gaunt air of submission was both meek and sullen. He lingered an instant and then moved forward regretfully and came listlessly through the gate and began walking steadily down the path, his eyes staring blankly at the ground, his arms dangling at his sides loosely.

"You bring him back, Mista' Cahta'," Calgary said. "Do you hear? You bring him back, now."

"Mista' Cahta'," said Raymond guardedly, "if the Wilson boy ain' hurt then it's safe to send for the women, ain' it?"

"I don't know." Carter glanced about helplessly and wondered dismally what to say. "You'd better wait, Raymond. The Wilson boy is all right, but there's no telling what a few hotheads might try. Yes, Raymond, you'd better wait."

Raymond nodded and stepped back, and Carter turned and walked to where Jess had stopped to wait. They returned to the car in silence. A steady wind was blowing up from the river, pungent with the smell of burning leaves. A spotted mongrel joined them from the side. He sniffed at their heels for a few paces, was disappointed, and loped off ahead. The men were assembled outside the store to watch them go. Each of them seemed round-shouldered.

Carter held the door open for Jess and then came around the front and sat down behind the wheel. He did not look at him until they were on the road, and then his eyes were drawn up his face slowly to the edge of the bandage. An appalling sorrow went through him.

"That looks bad, Jess. You'd better have a doctor see it."

"I guess not, Mr. Carter," Jess decided. "I guess a doctor won't

be much help."

No, Carter remembered, I guess not. He forced his eyes back to the road, but soon the full realization of what he was doing swept over him, and he gripped the wheel with all his strength, feeling that his limbs would go wild with panic were he to relax his arms even slightly.

"Why'd you have to stab him, Jess? Couldn't you whip him with your hands if you had to?"

"I guess not, Mr. Carter," Jess said, and went on resentfully. "There were three of them, Mr. Carter, three of them hitting me with a lead pipe." His fingers twitched nervously on his thighs. He had large, sinuous veins that spilled erratically over the backs of his hands. "I guess you didn't know that, did you?"

"No, I didn't. Simpson and Suggs said they found you fighting in the alley."

"They didn't find me," Jess said, with a low, mirthless laugh. "They were *there*."

Carter said nothing. Jess gazed ahead for several moments and then turned abruptly.

"I don't carry a knife. Here, Mr. Carter. Here, look at this!"

And before Carter realized what he was doing he had torn his shirt free from his trousers and had clawed open the buttons to reveal a thick, wide calico strip girdling his bare waist just above the hips. A thick wadding of gauze had been stuffed underneath on one side, but the blood had soaked through anyway in three places, one dark blot and two very faint stains, and it was impossible to tell whether it had flowed from one wound or many. Carter was horrified.

"It wasn't my knife that cut him," he heard Jess say.

Carter stared down at him with amazement, letting his eyes dwell sickly on the awesome sight, growing sicker and sicker with what they saw until he thought he would vomit. It was right over the kidney.

"Doesn't it hurt?" was all he could say.

"Yes, suh, Mr. Carter. It hurts."

Carter let another minute pass and then made up his mind, and he slammed the brakes on as hard as he could, hurling himself forward and banging Jess up hard against the front. He whirled immediately to speak, but the car had skidded through a dry patch and the wind caught the harsh dust and rammed it fiercely into his

face, blinding and choking him, so that he was reduced to coughing and clutching helplessly at his eyes.

"I've been lying to you, Jess," he gasped, when he could finally speak. "You're in trouble and there isn't much time. Get out and run, and for God's sake, hurry!"

Jess remained perfectly still. Carter shook him roughly.

"Do you understand, Jess? The Wilson boy is dying. They want you for murder!"

Jess spoke very softly. "Yes, suh, Mr. Carter," he said, staring intently down into his lap. "I knew I hurt him pretty bad."

Carter gaped with astonishment. "Then what are you doing here?" he cried frantically. "Why did you come?"

"I guess it's best this way," Jess continued, in a sad and steady voice. "Maybe they'll leave the rest of us alone."

"Jess," Carter asked, with hoarse wonderment, "do you know what will happen to you?"

"Yes, suh, Mr. Carter."

"And you still want to go?"

"Yes, suh, Mr. Carter."

"I can't take you," Carter decided, his confusion rising into a muddled despair. "I told your father I'd bring you back. No, I can't take you."

"He knew you didn't mean it," Jess said.

"He knew also?"

"Yes, suh, Mr. Carter. We all knew it was pretty bad. We had a meeting last night and decided I was to give myself up if the police came for me alone. I'm glad it was you, Mr. Carter. I don't like the police."

"Oh, God," Carter realized, with an overpowering shame. "They all knew I was lying."

"You did it for the best," Jess said.

"Shut up, Jess," Carter pleaded. "For Christ's sake, shut up!"

Jess looked down humbly.

"It's none of my business!" Carter exclaimed. He banged his hand down on the steering wheel, hurting himself, but not feeling the pain until later. "I'm washing my hands of the whole thing. You get out here and do what you want. I'm not having anything to do with it."

He waited, breathless and furiously distraught, until Jess reached for the door.

“Jess,” he asked, almost whispering, “what are you going to do?”

“Walk into town, I guess.”

Carter gazed at him and went limp with a sense of futility. The resistance drained out of him, leaving him hollow, cold, and numb.

“All right, Jess. I’ll take you.”

Jess sat back, and in silence they spiraled down through the hills toward the level ground. They passed Perkins, the solitary plowman watching them ride by, and soon came to the bridge. After the bridge the town was before them. Carter stared ahead tensely for a sign of motion on the road. It was empty. A few minutes out, he brought the car to a stop and put the top down. He rolled each of the windows up tight. A flock of crows went winging overhead.

“I’m sorry about the school, Mr. Carter,” Jess said, when they were driving again. “Pap and the other men, they didn’t like it, but we liked it fine.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Carter said.

“I tried not to fight, Mr. Carter. I thought if I kept my hands down they’d stop hitting me, but they kept after me like they’d beat me to death. I had to do what I could. I had to try to save myself.”

“Sure, Jess. Of course.”

Carter turned off before he reached the first buildings and circled the outskirts so as to come up behind the police station. He entered town finally, driving slowly now, and as they rode past the comfortable white houses, all with their fine shade trees and spotless picket fences or stunted hedgerows, the bell in the church steeple began to sound. It tolled eight times. Jess smiled grimly.

“I guess we’re both going to be late for school.”

“There won’t be any school today,” Carter said.

In another minute they were there. An atmosphere of excitement filled the area. People had collected in small groups on both sides of the street. Others were streaming up. Mercer and Beeman stood together at the top of the steps. They came hurrying down as soon as Carter appeared. Mercer got into the car. He had shaved and washed, and he looked hard now and wide-awake.

“Any trouble?”

Carter shook his head.

“You can decide,” Mercer went on rapidly. “There’s still time to take him out, but they’ll sure as hell get after the whole bunch if we

do.”

“He wants to stay.”

“Do you?”

Jess nodded. He was beginning to look frightened. Mercer gave him no time.

“Walk fast when we get out.”

He took hold of his arm and pushed the door open. Beeman fell in on the other side, and they moved quickly across the sidewalk and into the building. The people near the door began crowding forward, and then Beeman stepped out to face them.

That was all Carter saw. He had put the car in gear and was rolling forward, and it all vanished behind him like the macrocosm of a turbulent dream. He crawled forward aimlessly for a few blocks, wondering dully where to go, and then turned at the crossroad and drove slowly toward his house. He was tired and sick, and there was nothing for him to do now but sleep.

About the Author

Joseph Heller (1923–1999) was an American satirical novelist, short-story writer, and dramatist. His debut novel, *Catch-22,* introduced the concept of a catch-22 to the English lexicon, and became an antiwar classic during the U.S. conflict in Vietnam.

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